



Strengthening Protected Area Management: King Abdulaziz Royal Nature Reserve Engages in Technical Exchanges with Leading Andalusian Sites

Facilitated by IUCN Med and IUCN ROWA, with the support of Junta de Andalucía, in the framework of the IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas





As part of its commitment to enhancing effective conservation, the [King Abdulaziz Royal Nature Reserve \(KARNR\)](#)—an IUCN Member based in Saudi Arabia—undertook a technical exchange visit to four leading protected areas in Andalusia, Spain. The five-day mission, held in April 2025, was organized by the IUCN Regional Office for West Asia (ROWA) in collaboration with the IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation (IUCN Med), and was conducted within the framework of the IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas.

The high-level KARNR delegation was led by the CEO of the King Abdulaziz Development Authority and included senior leadership and experts across multiple disciplines: the Director General of Environment and Sustainability, Head of Joint Services, CEO Secretary and Senior Officer for Protocol, Director General of Marketing and Communication, Director General of Operations, Head of Strategy and Corporate Excellence, Director General of Governance, Compliance and Risk, Director General of Internal Audit, Director General of Systems and Legal Affairs, and the Director General of Investment and Business Development. Their participation ensured a holistic and strategic engagement with the Spanish protected areas, enriching institutional learning and fostering opportunities for long-term collaboration.

Joining the visit from IUCN ROWA were the Regional Director, the Regional Director's Office, and the Membership and Institutional Engagement Manager, highlighting the strategic significance of the mission. Their presence underscored IUCN's strong commitment to supporting member institutions in the region, fostering cross-regional collaboration, and advancing the Green List agenda through direct knowledge exchange and institutional dialogue.

This comprehensive and high-level engagement not only facilitated valuable insights into Spain's protected area governance and management but also strengthened international partnerships, paving the way for enhanced conservation outcomes across West Asia and the Mediterranean.

Learning from Andalusia's Conservation Models

The exchange was made possible thanks to the strong institutional cooperation between the IUCN offices in the Mediterranean and West Asia regions. The Andalusian Regional Government ([Junta de Andalucía](#))—a Member of IUCN—plays a central role in the management and protection of many of the sites visited, and its long-standing commitment to conservation and sustainable development provided an ideal setting for dialogue and peer learning. In addition, the [Arid Zones Experimental Research Station of the Spanish National Research Council \(EEZA-CSIC\)](#) is a pioneering research institute on arid zone management and conservation. The visit brought together KARNR's leadership with managers and experts from some of Andalusia's most emblematic protected areas and the EEZA, offering a valuable opportunity to explore international best practices in governance, planning, and adaptive management, while strengthening cooperation with IUCN's regional and global networks.

Sierra Nevada National and Natural Park



The exchange opened with a day visit between the delegation of the King Abdulaziz Royal Nature Reserve and the management team of the [Sierra Nevada National and Natural Park](#), both of which are listed on the IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas. This shared designation offered an ideal platform for peer-to-peer learning around the implementation of global standards for effective protected area management.

Sierra Nevada encompasses over 172,000 hectares and is the highest mountain range in the Iberian Peninsula, with peaks reaching up to 3,479 meters. The area holds dual legal status as both a National Park (IUCN Category II) and a Natural Park (IUCN Category V), and the area is also a Biosphere Reserve as well as hosting one Ramsar site and several Natura 2000 sites.

Discussions focused on governance models, zoning and land-use planning, effective management, legal frameworks, and the value of cooperative partnerships. The park's inclusive Participation Council, composed of 60 representatives from government, municipalities, landowners, NGOs, and local stakeholders, was highlighted as a model for transparent and participatory governance.

As part of the visit, the delegation explored the Hoya de Pedraza Botanical Garden, a specialised conservation facility that hosts and protects endangered species endemic to Sierra Nevada,

while reproducing high-mountain ecosystems and habitats. This ex-situ conservation effort supports broader restoration and biodiversity objectives in the park's alpine zones.

The visit offered KARNR valuable insight into how science, governance, and participatory management can intersect to create resilient and inclusive conservation models—especially relevant for reserves dealing with ecological sensitivity and human pressure.

Granada UNESCO Global Geopark



The second day of the exchange took the KARNR delegation to the [Granada UNESCO Global Geopark](#), a vast and geologically diverse territory characterised by spectacular badlands, fossil-rich sedimentary formations, and some of the oldest inhabited human settlements in Europe. The delegation examined how conservation objectives can be aligned with rural development and sustainable tourism. The visit focused on the Geopark's governance model and its ability to foster collaboration between public authorities, scientific institutions, local governments, and community-based enterprises.

The delegation visited ALMAGRUZ, an ethnographic interpretation centre that is part of the Geopark's outreach network. In addition to promoting environmental education and cultural heritage, the centre functions as an ecotourism business certified by the park and offers unique

accommodation in traditional cave houses. There, the team gained insight into how the Geopark promotes inclusive and participatory management.

In the afternoon, the group explored the Alicún Baths and the Toril travertine formation, a remarkable natural aqueduct formed by mineral-rich thermal waters depositing calcium carbonate over millennia. This living geological structure, unique in its formation, exemplifies the intricate connections between natural processes and cultural heritage. Notably, these travertine formations are situated on privately owned land. Through conscientious stewardship, the landowners have maintained the site's ecological integrity, demonstrating that private ownership can align with conservation objectives.

The visit underscored the Geopark's ability to combine conservation with local empowerment, showcasing how geodiversity and sustainable tourism can support both biodiversity and economic resilience—key insights for protected areas seeking to enhance their social and ecological value.

Cabo de Gata-Níjar UNESCO Biosphere Reserve



On the third day, the delegation visited the [Cabo de Gata-Níjar Natural Park and Geopark](#), a unique protected area where volcanic landscapes, arid ecosystems, and rich coastal and marine biodiversity converge. The site is internationally recognised under several frameworks, including UNESCO's Global Geoparks Network and the Ramsar and Natura 2000 networks.

The visit included the Las Amoladeras Visitor Centre, where the team explored how the park interprets its geological and cultural heritage, supports sustainable tourism, and manages environmental pressures through community engagement and science-based planning. The park's coastal habitats, salt pans, and underwater ecosystems—including some of the most pristine *Posidonia oceanica* meadows in the Mediterranean—were presented as key conservation assets.

Cabo de Gata's integrated management model combines habitat restoration, traditional use recovery, visitor regulation, and marine protection. The delegation also learned about ecotourism initiatives and projects focused on climate adaptation and marine litter monitoring.

Experimental Station for Arid Zones (EEZA – CSIC)



The fourth day of the exchange focused on conservation in arid and semi-arid ecosystems, with a visit to the EEZA-CSIC in Almería. EEZA-CSIC is a global reference in dryland conservation science and the largest facility for gazelle species recovery in Europe.

The morning was dedicated to ex-situ conservation, including a guided tour of facilities that host breeding programs for endangered Sahelo-Saharan ungulates. EEZA-CSIC plays a critical role in the management and genetic conservation of species such as the mhorr gazelle (*Nanger dama mhorr*)—extinct in the wild since 1968. Delegates learned about the long-standing monitoring, breeding, and reintroduction strategies applied to this and other species such as the scimitar-horned oryx, addax, and dorcas gazelle.



In the afternoon, in-situ conservation efforts were presented, highlighting field projects involving reintroductions, demographic monitoring through camera traps, and ecological modelling. These efforts, based on robust data and multi-partner collaboration, aim to rebuild viable populations of threatened species in their natural ranges.



With a strong emphasis on ecological research, evolutionary biology, and desertification monitoring, EEZA's integrated approach to conservation science provided the KARNR team with practical and scalable insights for dryland restoration and species management in similarly arid environments.

IUCN Centre for Mediterranean Cooperation (IUCN Med)

As part of the visit, the CEO of the King Abdulaziz Royal Nature Reserve held a meeting with the Director of IUCN Med and the Regional Director of IUCN ROWA. The discussion explored opportunities for future cooperation, joint initiatives, and the strengthening of the partnership between KARNR and IUCN. The meeting also focused on the exchange of expertise and the coordination of efforts in areas such as biodiversity conservation, protection of natural areas, and the development of ecotourism.

The delegation of the KARNR visited IUCN Med headquarters in Málaga, where the team reviewed key lessons learned, engaged in strategic discussions, and explored opportunities for continued collaboration.



These dialogues reaffirmed the value of regional collaboration and IUCN's role as a platform for facilitating peer-to-peer learning and integrated approaches to conservation and sustainable development.



Reflection in Light of the IUCN Green List Components

The IUCN Green List is a global programme recognising and promoting fair and effective conservation around the world. At its heart is the IUCN Green List Standard, which sets an international benchmark for successful conservation that protected and conserved areas can use to measure, improve and maintain their performance.



Throughout the exchange between protected areas, the experiences and lessons drawn from each site offered valuable insights that directly align with the four pillars of the IUCN Green List Standard. These real-world examples reinforced how excellence in governance, planning, management, and conservation outcomes can be achieved and sustained through collaborative, context-based approaches.

Good Governance

Transparent institutional frameworks, participatory decision-making processes, and community-based approaches were consistent themes throughout the visit. Sierra Nevada and Cabo de Gata-Níjar illustrated how inclusive governance enhances conservation impact and local engagement, while the Granada Geopark highlighted how strong support to local businesses and associations can promote economic development based on site values.

Sound Design and Planning

A comprehensive identification of site natural and cultural values, as well as an understanding of the socio-economic context was demonstrated by Sierra Nevada, the Granada Geopark and Cabo de Gata. Effective land-use planning, integration of geodiversity, and zoning for both conservation and sustainable use were key features observed at the Granada Geopark and EEZA, demonstrating how science-based planning underpins long-term ecological viability.

Effective Management

The delegation witnessed robust management systems grounded in evidence, with adaptive strategies to respond to environmental and social changes. Monitoring systems, strong ranger presence, ecotourism regulation, collaboration with research institutions and public-private collaboration emerged as success factors across all sites.

Successful Conservation Outcomes

From improved habitat connectivity and species recovery to enhanced education and tourism initiatives, all visited areas showcased concrete conservation achievements that contribute to national and international biodiversity goals.



Looking Ahead: Regional Collaboration for Greater Impact



The IUCN Green List Standard programme provided a clear and structured benchmark for this knowledge exchange, allowing participants to assess protected area performance through a globally recognised lens. This foundation deepened their understanding of good governance, effective management, and successful conservation outcomes, directly supporting KARNR's efforts to maintain and advance its position within the Green List framework.

This technical exchange represents a foundational step toward strengthening the management and governance of protected areas in Saudi Arabia. The insights gained—rooted in concrete practices observed across Andalusian sites—will inform ongoing work at KARNR, particularly in ecosystem restoration, climate adaptation, species management, and stakeholder engagement.

This initiative also highlights the power of collaboration across IUCN regional offices and its Membership, showcasing how coordinated efforts can foster knowledge exchange and advance effective conservation at both local and global levels. Cross-regional exchanges, such as this one between West Asia and the Mediterranean, are vital to modern conservation efforts. They offer opportunities to explore diverse ecological contexts, governance models, and innovative



solutions, while enabling the adaptation of effective tools and strategies across cultural and environmental settings.

Long-term conservation planning depends on continuous learning and the integration of global best practices. Engaging with counterparts in other regions strengthens institutional resilience, promotes adaptive management, and ensures the relevance and impact of conservation initiatives over time.

IUCN ROWA and IUCN Med are committed to expanding this model of peer-to-peer learning and technical collaboration across sites and regions. Similar exchanges will be promoted in the future to support capacity-building, share replicable solutions, and contribute to the global effort to achieve effective, equitable, and resilient protected and conserved areas.